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Femininity in the Position of the Oppressed in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* A Comparison to Nelly Arcan's *Putain* in Canadian and Quebec Literary Portrayals of Contemporary Womanhood

ABSTRACT: Nino Ricci, an award-winning English-speaking Italian descendant, and Nelly Arcan, suicidal Quebecker from Montreal, portray contemporary womanhood as seen through the lenses of oppression. In Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* the figure of mother becomes a curse of the woman's son, whose whole existence is conditioned by his mother's incidental and adulterous pregnancy. The mother shifts from the position of an individual to the position of a symbol by becoming sinful representation of her disobedience in the relation to social rules. She is dominated by masculine gaze and rules established by men. Inversely acts Cynthia, the prostitute in Nelly Arcan's *Putain*, who chooses her fate intentionally but who is equally conditioned by the social environment in which she grew up. Being a prostitute is an act of succumbing to masculine tyranny.

KEY WORDS: womanhood, oppressor, subjugation, Ricci, Arcan.

In a dictionary of English language the entry "femininity" is followed by a vague definition stating that it is "the quality of being feminine." By reaching further, the explanation of the word "feminine" is revealed too as "suitable to or characteristic of a woman [and] possessing qualities or characteristics considered typical of or appropriate to a woman" (Collins Dictionary, 2013). Unfortunately, the dictionary does not solve a mystery of what is considered appropriate or typical. Yet, these definitions highlight the complexity of the notion as it is impossible to formulate a brief and exhaustive explanation of femininity due to the fact that this concept goes far beyond the capacity of a dictionary. It is possible to devote lengthy analyses to the notion itself but also to the position of femi-

ninity which is often depicted in the negative contexts of oppression as it is in Nino Ricci's novel *Lives of the Saints* and Nelly Arcan's *Whore*. The first one is a story of a woman and her son who have to leave Italy and emigrate to Canada as the mother renounces to conceal her adulterous pregnancy. The second one is a prostitute's account, written in a stream of consciousness.

The oppressed aspect of womanhood, namely the one struggling with an undefined and vague but unequivocally male figure in the position of a powerful and indirect aggressor, is interpreted by Nino Ricci in the context of a subconscious display of the female rebellion against the social rules of women's subjugation (RICCI 1999: 163). The fact that the child protagonist's mother challenges the local community and disturbs her son's inner peace by the means of extra-marital pregnancy, since being pregnant qualifies as an outright manifestation of femininity, indicates how much the character of mother clings to the concept of using her womanhood against the feeling of being abused as a woman and against the sense of inferiority generated as much by men's lustful gazes, as by their manipulation.

Indeed, Ricci highlights two aspects of the same notion. The author portrays Cristina as a desired woman who attracts men's attention, not only by evoking the figure of her sinful blue-eyed lover (1999: 11), but also by presenting accidental cases of Cristina's passing-by admirers, for example Cazzingulo the driver (1999: 54) who encourages her to sit on his knees to get her to the nearest town for free or an elegant officer, charming Darcangelo, who courts her with wine and chocolates (1999: 181). Nevertheless, these are only minor incidents which do not have enough importance in order to shake the woman's firm attitude towards the society's strict disapproval of her actions. As Marino Tuzi claims, Cristina is depicted by Ricci as a symbol of fecundity through the centering her character upon the notion of pregnancy comparable to rejecting by her the traditional model of family and femininity. Apparently, this is the reason why other women in the village show contempt for Cristina. Indeed, her demeanour reveals their failure within the society as they accept the male dominance and the patriarchal world. To underline the confrontation of two parties, Ricci juxtaposes Cristina's slender body with the village women's mediocrity (TUZI 1997).

The social order and disapproval are expressed through two male figures being of vital significance to Cristina's existence, namely her husband and her father. The former, having emigrated to Canada, still judges his wife's demeanour from distance, disposes of her person without hesitation or consideration and remains a frightful echo of his own violent and harsh father by throwing plates in other people's faces when caught in a fit of rage (1999: 33). The latter is at hand's reach and assumes a very similar role of a manipulative supervisor and a severe critic of his daughter's conduct by using a condemning silence, leading to constant disputes or cursing her presence and manifesting his hatred and contempt (1999: 129). Consequently, the woman feels weighed down by the domi-

nating men of her surroundings and grasps at the possibility of counteracting their manipulation through transforming her affair and the ensuing pregnancy into the embers of her personal rebellion. Still, this bizarre revenge does not lift the oppression of men's manipulative spirits from upon her womanhood, instead making her feed on her son's sense of insecurity. Unfortunately, the woman's rebellion fuelled by her femininity is followed by her ultimate fall.

It is possible to outline four targets of Cristina's resistance, three of them secretly desired, the fourth one being the collateral damage. The first three remain: the husband, the father and the society. The last one, incidentally put onto the path of his mother's crusade and unintentionally damaged, is the son, a seven-year-old boy, Vittorio, who becomes a silent witness of the turbulent events which follow and an unwanted victim of the feminine aggression aimed at men and not at a child, ensuing from the fact of Cristina being punished for not fulfilling the accepted womanhood model and defending herself through offensive. The attention of all the figures participating directly or indirectly in the unexpected rebellion is centered on the extra-marital pregnancy gossip first and on the unborn child taking the form of a curved-shaped fact, crudely exposed beneath Cristina's baggy dresses, which cannot be easily concealed, later. Despite the focus on the sinful pregnancy, each observer and participant is affected by the affair in a slightly different manner. These discrepancies result from the fact that the reason for discriminating against Cristina as an independently-thinking woman differ for each party.

The marital infidelity is implicated by the husband's emigration to Canada and by limiting his attention for the abandoned family only to financial matters (1999: 85). The figure of husband and father remains indistinct and even obscure, but his presence overwhelms and suffocates the mother and the son, who feel dominated by the one absent in flesh, but overpowering in spirit. Vittorio barely remembers his father, yet his mother's agitation provoked in the context of her violent and opinionated husband makes the boy reject the image of his parent to the extent of resisting the idea of living with him. The process of rejecting father figure starts with small details and imprecise sentiments with Vittorio remembering the scene from the past in which his mother is hit with a plate in a domestic brawl (1999: 33) or being metaphorically isolated from Cristina according to his father's will when he is not to sleep in the same bed with her but gets his own mattress like a grown boy. Vittorio's grandfather assumes the role of his son-in-law's spokesperson by justifying every action with the father's probable approval, for instance claiming that Vittorio would not be allowed to sleep with his mother like a baby (1999: 32). The boy confesses that he struggles with a sense of being controlled as if the father was godlike and could extend his reach and catch his son from across the ocean. Cristina's revenge on her husband touches upon the same issues and refers to a parallel perspective. The woman's frustration involves the suppression of her individuality and independent spirit.

Therefore, the act of adultery followed by an illegitimate child may be understood as the expression of her exhaustion with being incessantly scrutinized as well as the articulation of her need of self-constituting and self-respect.

The figure of grandfather to Vittorio and father to Cristina settles in between the woman, her husband and the society. In fact, on the one hand he contributes to the feeling of oppression in his daughter and on the other hand is influenced by the viewpoint of an old man, for whom infidelity in marriage and the audacious protest against spiteful commentaries, hypocritical pieces of advice and manipulation are unthinkable and outrageous. Blinded by rage, he hurts his daughter by reproaching her stupidity (1999: 85) and lack of moral spine as well as prophesying and wishing her imminent death (1999: 162). Yet this way he inflicts pain on himself as well. By abusing his daughter, he lays a heavy burden on his shoulders, that is condemns himself to unhappiness, misery, loneliness and infirmity. The father is a little more restrictive reflection of the social reaction to Cristina's sin. In fact, he becomes a symbol of the society maltreating the women and represents the patriarchal coerciveness (TUZI 1997). The society acts in the name of traditional decorum and changes their approach from friendly understanding through painful gossiping and fake sympathy to peremptory preclusion. However, Cristina senses their hypocrisy and rejects any attempts at reconciliation in fear of being rejected herself. Her courageous exposure is a form of defending herself and lying to herself that she executes a sort of punishment for their indecisive and narrow-minded attitude.

Cristina's rebellious comportment of an animal being hunted down has the greatest impact on her son, Vittorio. The boy becomes the focal point of the process in which his mother searches for strength to object in the struggle for respect and falls victim to oppressive masculinity; he gets trapped in the eye of the cyclone, therefore he sustains the greatest damage. His path towards ruthless adulthood through incomprehension, fearful dreams, humiliation and uprooting starts from the incident in the stable, the key event in the story and the point of departure for all gender-focused transformations within the narrative. Ricci describes it by providing only chunks of information, opaque and blurred, as it is seen through the eyes of a child:

I was awakened by a muffled shout. The shout — it had sounded like a man's — had come from the direction of our stable [...]. I set down my book and bounded down the crooked stone stairway at the side of the house that led down to it; but when I rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps I stopped short. The stable door was closed, but through a crack at the bottom of it a small, tapered head was flicking its tongue: a snake. I had seen it just in time; now I stood frozen as it slithered a long, slim green through the crack in the door and disappeared down a row of tomatoes in my mother's garden.

The incident in the stable is not described directly as it is filtered through the child's perception. Consequently, it is unclear what the nature of the occurrence really was, but the symbolism of the scene leads to resolving any doubts. The snake slithering through the crack in the door refers to various interpretations which all create a disturbing image of the forthcoming doom and lead to the complex portrayal of controlling and overwhelming womanhood with sex. The first association and the most obvious allusion to a snake may be found in the biblical context. In the Book of Genesis the snake is a representation of sin and a reference to temptation (WERNES 382). Analogically, the snake from the stable, which is seen by Vittorio in the first place, may be interpreted as a harbinger of scandalous circumstances, possibly making the participants of the incident endure future misery. Furthermore, snake symbolism extends to allusions in the context of sexuality as it is related to the concept of fertility as captured in the early pagan beliefs. In this particular theory the serpent is identified with Gaia, the goddess of "the earth's fertility and the immortal cycles of life" (382). Finally, the snake from Ricci's narrative may be a phallic embodiment of male sexual potency, which results from the fact that "in many cultures around the world the snake represents the phallus" (KILLE 61). Moreover, in psychoanalysis Freud fathomed the serpent as a common image appearing in subconscious sexual fantasies. The reference to the phallic symbolism of the snake is also visible in Genesis since the conversation between the serpent and Eve has a sexual and feminine nuance about it by becoming "a deep description of the experience of sexual awakening" (61).

All the symbols which are associated with the snake click into place when analysed in the context of Cristina's behaviour. The incident with her lover and the snake in the stable can be read as her sexual awakening after years of loneliness in marriage, the fertility symbol finds its realization in the woman's ensuing pregnancy while the concept of phallus brings the evocation of the sexual act which must have had place in the stable and which seems to be ignored by people involved since the female protagonist prefers to withdraw into silence (Imboden 1992). Furthermore, the snake is also revealed to be the symbol of Cristina's victimization and the prohibition of sexual freedom for women as Cristina almost dies from the snake's bite (TUZI 1997).

The symbolism escapes Vittorio who is too young to grasp the meaning of the event. Through his eyes the situation revolves around the snake, which equals to a danger for the mother's health and is known as a bad omen among simpletons from the village, and the blue-eyed man who flees the scene like a culprit. Ricci focuses on the boy's first reaction to the sudden appearance:

But while I had been staring after the path of the snake, someone had cracked open the door of the stable. Two dark eyes were staring down at me now from the shadows, concentrating their energies on me as if to make me disappear by

force of will. I was about to turn and run when the stable door opened a few inches further and the two eyes suddenly swooped out of the stable like swallows, turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight, bright flames that held me transfixed and seemed to burn away all other features of the figure swooping down on me.

RICCI 2008: 24

Vittorio feels “transfixed” and interprets the intentions of a stranger as a desire to make the boy, who is in the context an unwanted observer, disappear. The man takes the form of his piercing stare, which provokes in the child a feeling of unease or even fear. This first brief face-to-face showdown seems to be heralding the scandal’s everlasting consequences on the boy’s existence and on his perception of life by making him confront new fears and an unknown context.

Nonetheless, for the son the true consequences of his mother’s actions begin with the acts of social intolerance and the boy’s stigmatization through Cristina’s silent exclusion from the local community. The society adopts an approach of intermediary in the process of oppressing Vittorio with the symbol of his mother’s femininity. Thereupon, it is possible to draw a controversial and unorthodox conclusion that the boy becomes oppressed by his mother’s womanhood being a medium for sharing the social ostracism. It is then valid to say he is haunted by masculinity looming on the horizon of his adult life. This continues when he displays jealousy about men attracted to his mother (TUZI 1997) or when he discovers the sexual nature of Cristina’s relationship with the father of her unborn child and the incident in the stable (IMBODEN 1992).

Furthermore, very soon gossip morphs into action embodied by fights between the boy and his schoolmates who repeat calumnies addressed at Cristina (RICCI 1999: 95). Vittorio is scared of his own aggression triggered by other boys offending his mother, but finally hears that his temper is “this woman’s fault” and not his. Tormented by deprecating rumors and exhausted with the fight, he becomes entangled in another act of oppression involving sexual humiliation. The boy falls prey to a cruel game arranged by his peers, which means that in order to join their gang he has to show them his penis. This fake initiation act is a punishment for Cristina’s rebellion against the rules and it refers to sexual context intentionally since the woman’s sin, the manifestation of her pregnancy and the concept of the oppression, all touch upon the intimate sphere of sexuality and gender. Yet this is not the only manner in which the boy becomes stigmatized through Cristina’s demeanour and discrimination against her sex. He is also compelled to leave home and condemned to emigration and uprooting. For a seven-year-old child the constraint to say farewell to all he knew as a motherland becomes a searing imprint of homelessness and insecurity. Not without a reason is he forced to face his future abroad alone: the mother dies, just as the motherland looms forgotten and dark on the horizon.

In reference to gender roles within Ricci's narrative Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject plays a crucial role in deciphering meanings in two gender-related configurations, namely Cristina-society and Cristina-Vittorio. KRISTEVA speaks in the book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) about rejecting the maternal in order to enter the social order and construct one's identity. Therefore, the abject being the state of being cast off can be referred to Cristina as the one rejected by the society organized by the men's rules with a model role assigned to women. Cristina becomes then a metaphorical child of the local community she renounces with the subconscious intention of building her inner self. The society realizes the concept of the abject as well by rejecting what is considered vile, which means in this particular context Cristina's filthy behaviour. A similar arrangement is in force in the case of Vittorio's relation to his mother. In fact, the consequences of his mother's actions make her repellent to him as the maternal becomes defiled and disgusting in the theory of the abject.

A difficult relationship with parents, especially with mother figure whose negative image brought to the form of an aberration by the oppressive situation played out by the community led by men seems to be irreversibly imprinted in the protagonist's memory, turns out to be the axis of Nelly Arcan's *Whore*, a literary confession of a prostitute defined by men's lust. Cynthia's mother is revealed to be one of the reasons for the girl to become a prostitute as she always remained a manifestation of her husband's desire, her femininity permanently subdued (BORDELEAU 22). By believing that succumbing entirely and voluntarily to male lust guarantees prevalence, Cynthia becomes — similarly to Cristina in *Lives of the Saints* — the victim of her femininity while her womanhood descends to the position of the oppressed. The act of whoring is supposed to contribute to liberation and to allow avoiding the entrapment intended for women, but paradoxically brings the opposite: hatred, indignity, absolute dependence from men.

In *Whore* too Kristeva's abject finds its specific realization. On the one hand, by turning into prostitution Cynthia rejects her mother and isolates herself from her, but, on the other hand, she defies the abject in the act of submitting herself to sex deprived of feelings or meaning. As KRISTEVA (1982) claims that it is imprinted in human nature to fear all bodily-related elements seen as foul and abhorrent, such as bodily fluids, Arcan's protagonist's acceptance towards what is considered the abject, in this particular case sperm, may be read in the category of the character making a stand. Yet Cynthia's resistance is never audible nor open as it is in Cristina's case. Nevertheless, it is not uniquely directed at the social order in which women are dominated by men's will and bodies. It is equally a form of rebellion against the traditional upbringing which created present social and gender arrangements (DITMORE 2006).

Femininity in Cynthia's ideology is not innate as it is acquired thanks to other people's gazes which carry a praise for the woman's beauty and sexual

attractiveness (BORDELEAU 22). At the same time she claims that femininity has characteristics of a learned skill needing talent and predisposition as any other ability. Therefore, Cynthia has necessary talents and her femininity at first acts as an asset in order to become altered into a burden and a decisive factor in her abuse. The abuse has a psychological nature since her body is willingly given away to men. Furthermore, she partly contributes to the fact of remaining a victim. Through her silent rebellion she embarks on a path to dependence from men who oppress her by desiring her body. As only they can make her a woman, her femininity is revealed to be the object of her frustration. Moreover, the society imposes certain standards of femininity on her, hence, if she was not a woman and if she did not use this fact as a tool of seduction, she would not be reproved by the society and would not fight distress resulting from being a focal point of lustful gazes.

As a prostitute Cynthia loses individuality and identity as she is not perceived as a person with a unique character, but as an amalgam of other women, an unidentifiable collectivity, as well as particular parts of her body of erotic importance. Arcan describes it in a stream of thoughts, chaotic and moving:

And I wouldn't know how to say what these men see when they see me, I look for it in the mirror every day but don't find it, and what they see isn't me, it can't be, it can only be somebody else, a vague, transitory form taking on the color of the wall, nor do I know whether I'm beautiful nor to what degree, if I'm still young or already old, obviously they see me the way woman is seen, in the strongest sense, breasts, curves, and a way of lowering the eyes, but a woman is never a woman except when compared to another.

ARCAN 14—15

The protagonist does not rebel openly against the manner in which she is treated and against being reduced to body parts or losing her identity to the embodiment of sex. On the surface she accepts it as a normal behaviour by simply ascertaining it as a fact, not debating it in order to contest the state of things. Her acquiescence is an effect of her gratitude to men as if their gazes were bringing her to life and her existence was conditioned by their attention. Furthermore, she gives men her permission to treat women as their property, not in terms of consorting with individuals but in terms of women's sexual usefulness. She highlights her transparency as a prostitute and underlines how female body parts belong to men: "(They are) turned on by I don't know what, since it isn't me they're getting hard for, never has been, it's my whoredom, the fact that I'm there for that [...] as they try to believe that these bits of women were made for them [...]" (ARCAN 13). It is due to her acceptance that the axiom is not submitted to reconsideration. The lack of open rebellion and readiness for silent subordination additionally intensify the arrangement in which Cynthia as an individual merges with the abstract idea of sexual desire. These circumstances become

a path to perdition in which the protagonist suffers from deep frustration resulting only from the fact of being a woman reduced to her sex.

Cynthia expresses her hatred towards men who want to own her, yet she derives a deeply concealed narcissist pleasure from prostitution. Seduction, proved and approved by clients, guarantees confidence in the context of beauty and attractiveness. She has been created thanks to men's interest and lust, therefore, she develops an addiction to those she hates. In this particular context men have the privilege of escaping the slavery of looks, to which women are condemned. Their existence and identity do not hinge on their appearance. Nevertheless, Cynthia states it as a fact instead of perceiving it in terms of injustice. Yet she admits a feeling of entrapment devouring her ruthlessly, hence, due to her femininity, she remains a men's victim.

Both female characters, Cristina from *Lives of the Saints* and Cynthia from *Whore*, are defined and conditioned by their femininity. But the process of defining is realized in different circumstances and, therefore, in a different manner. Cristina does not introduce herself willingly into the position of the oppressed, but is forced into it by men dictating social approval or disapproval, hence, she attempts at standing up to arbitral condemnation, whereas Cynthia approaches freely and willingly with resistance being a matter of the subconscious and not the explicit. In both instances, the outcome is oppression, entrapping the two in the circle of frustration which is conveyed further and hits other targets, for example Cristina's son. Both of them are dependent from men, yet they handle their dependence through pride or self-infliction, which never bring them any good.

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Bio-bibliographical note

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